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Risch rose to the task

As a longtime certified friend and defender of Idaho's extraction industries, as well as a known scoffer of the "green" movement, interim Gov. Jim Risch defied expectations during his seven-month term to become something of a bold and unpredictable champion of protecting the state's environmental treasures.

As one political observer put it, Risch is leaving office next week "with a little Teddy Roosevelt" in his record, alluding loosely to Republican TR's indelible reputation for masterminding the acquisition of land more than 100 years ago for the nation's park system.

His legacy is impressive. He all but slammed the door on future coal-fired power plants being built in Idaho by opting out of a national plan allowing smokestack industries to buy mercury emissions credits.

That was followed by a chain of remarkable decisions that hatched a new Risch image. He adopted President Clinton's roadless plan to keep public lands from industrial development, ordered a search-and-kill mission for tainted elk, strongly opposed Proposition 2 that would've crippled community planning and zoning, and supported the Boulder-White Clouds and Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness bills.

Surprised professional environmentalists, including those who helped write Clinton's roadless policy, have heaped praise on Risch who, however, denies suddenly becoming a closet "green" champion.

No matter. Gov. Risch set a fitting standard for a state whose changing character now emphasizes outdoor quality of life.

It's an enviable standard, one that incoming Gov. Butch Otter should adopt and perpetuate. After all, Risch is as Republican as they come, but showed an understanding that ideology must be set aside when irreplaceable riches of nature are in the balance.